COMMUNICATION TO THE EDITORS

Dear Sirs:

This letter is prompted by the suspicion that [   ]
[   ] diverting essay, "The Greater Barrier," (*Studies*, Fall
1958) on the need for good English prose in intelligence was
not calculated only to entertain, which it did, but was also in-
tended to instruct, which, regrettably, it did not. The very
solemnity of your journal compels the assumption that be-
hind the author's frivolous shoals ("Chaucer, Shakespeare,
Conrad, O'Neill, Wolfe, Spillane" [imagine putting Wolfe in
there!]) lies the open water of Serious Purpose. The reader
is admonished at the outset that "the time is upon us when
we should face and begin to penetrate a barrier even greater
than that of foreign languages—the English language bar-
rier." Face it we then do, throughout much of the remainder
of the article. But penetrate it we do not.

The article does seem about to get down to business in the
section called "Spying the Land," devoted to discovering three
constituent parts of the barrier, or perhaps factors which
obscure its existence—"Self-Exculpation" (which is merely
the universal human tendency to avoid recognition of self-
guilt); the "Literary Bent" (a common subjective failing [or
triumph, depending on who has it]); and the forced "Viability
of the language," with its offspring, "linguistic chameleon-
ism." But having identified these characteristics of bad writ-
ing, the author abandons us, the article ends. It is necessary
to identify symptoms in order to diagnose an illness, but we
do not ordinarily stop there and seek to cure the disease with
a mere analgesic. The proper pathology finds the agent re-
sponsible for the condition and then treats it with antibiotics,
not aspirin. The problem with diseased writing is not the
determination of the all-too-obvious symptoms, but the iden-
tity of the causal virus.

A word or two must be put in here in defense of the writing
in the estimates, where a "predictive conclusion," your au-
thor says, is "useful only to the extent that it is precisely
qualified." Can this be an accurate axiom? We think not.
As a matter of fact, estimates which are too liberally sprinkled
with precise qualifiers sometimes seem to lose their way.

There is still room, we think, even in an estimate, for suggestions, degrees of emphasis, perhaps innuendo. For many readers, the neat shadings of probability are either lost or soon forgotten. What is more often remembered is the general drift of a paper, the over-all impression shaped by many things, qualifiers among them. Thus the writer of an estimate, though duty-bound to assign exact degrees of probability if he can, must also remember that he is usually creating more a rounded image than a sharp picture. We do not mean to rise here in defense of slovenly presentation or inexact qualification; we merely hope to refute the unkind notion that an estimate must stand or fall solely on the strength or weakness of its adverbs and adjectives, important as they are.

Moreover, the precision gained by assigning such words as "possible" and "probable" a value on a mathematical scale appears to upset your author most of all: by using mathematics, he says, we have "departed the realm of language." The fact that a word has a mathematical meaning, however, does not entitle him to suggest that it is no longer a part of our language. Words, after all, are used to express feeling or thought, mathematical or otherwise. Should we follow his argument to its absurd end and conclude that using the word "oak" would propel us from the "realm of language" into the realm of trees?

Beyond distinguishing the estimate from other varieties, "The Greater Barrier" makes no attempt to subdivide categories of intelligence writing. That is too bad, for there is no such thing as intelligence writing in general. Not yet, anyhow. And if that's what [ ] and the Office of Training would like to establish, then woe to us all. There is not now, nor should there be, a common school of prose for, say, current intelligence, national estimates, and technical memoranda. There are certain standards of good practice common to all intelligence writing, but most such standards can be applied to all prose; Self-Exculpation, the Literary Bent, and Viability are certainly not the exclusive properties of the intelligence community.

Perhaps, in some instances, we should admit that learning to write is a hopeless task; some of us just cannot master it. Why should this be any more disgraceful than the proposi-

tion that some of us just cannot draw, or paint, or sculpture? But let us assume that most of us are not completely hopeless, and need only apply to the Office of Training for instruction in the art. No special talent is needed to draw a recognizable chair, nor any great gift to write an understandable sentence. And presumably, with training and experience, the minimal chair or sentence can be improved upon.

Now one critical ingredient in such training and experience is not mentioned by your author and might be overlooked in the OTR. We should not begin by endlessly drawing chairs or endlessly writing sentences. First we must *look* at chairs. And first we must *read* before we write. Any normally perceptive person, exposed to a quantity of good reading, will soak some of it up. There is no point at all in instituting a course in creative writing, intelligence writing, or any other kind of writing for persons who have not read. This is not to say that reading will make it so. Not all readers are writers. But there is no such thing as a writer who has not read. And while this is—or should be—obvious, it is all too frequently forgotten.

Exhorting us to write better, to communicate more clearly, and to surmount the Greater Barrier is a pious exercise but one with little hope of practical accomplishment. It will remind those who probably cannot that they should. It may also remind those who can that they can. It may even lead to some worthwhile self-examination for those who are somewhere in between. But until ⸤⸥ loses his modesty and tells us how *he* penetrated the barrier, he must, in all good grace, rest content, albeit surrounded by all of us self-exculpitators.

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